

HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE MUSEUM

The United States Air Force Museum is internationally acclaimed as the world's largest and oldest military aviation museum. It is located at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, near Dayton, Ohio, home of the Wright Brothers.

The Museum's origin dates back to 1923 when it started in the corner of an aircraft hangar at McCook Field near downtown Dayton. From the informal showing of World War I planes and equipment of both the United States and foreign governments, the collection has grown to nearly 300 aircraft and major missiles, plus thousands of aviation artifacts.

Dayton had an early acquaintance with aviation. The Wright Brothers developed their 1903 flyer in Dayton and continued flying at nearby Huffman Prairie between 1904 and 1910. Experimental flying was conducted by the Army at McCook Field during and after World War I.

Area residents donated funds to purchase over 5,000 acres of land in the 1920s for the establishment of Wright Field as a research center to replace the outgrown McCook Field. The Museum was moved to Wright Field, and between 1927 and 1935, it occupied 8,100 square feet of space in a laboratory building.

In 1935, the Museum got its first real home in the form of a specially designed building at Wright Field costing \$203,000. It was paid for through the Works Progress Administration (WPA). By this time, the Museum collection included over 3,000 items. But the new home was converted to wartime use in 1941, and the collection went into storage.

At the end of the war, General "Hap" Arnold directed the collection of items for the opening of a National Air Museum. The Air Technical Service Command, predecessor to AFMC, was given the task of locating aircraft for the new

National Air Museum of the Smithsonian Institution. In 1947 the Air Force decided to re-open the Air Force Museum to emphasize aircraft technical developments, using aircraft and equipment not needed by the National Air Museum. Housed in Building 89, the collection was open by appointment only until April 1955 when it was opened to the public. It was located at adjoining Patterson Field in a World War II structure that had housed an engine-overhaul facility. Attendance in 1955 totaled 41,662 visitors. Since then attendance has spiraled to an average of over one million visitors a year.

In the early 1960s, the Museum built a uniquely designed interior "maze" floorplan which directed visitors along a controlled walkway, unfolding the story of military aviation in chronological sequence.

That converted WW II building was outgrown in the early 1960s. Further, it was neither fireproof or air conditioned and was unsuitable for properly protecting and displaying the growing, priceless collection. Support posts every 16 feet in one direction and every 50 feet in another, for instance, greatly restricted how and where aircraft could be exhibited.

Thanks to the Air Force Museum Foundation, a philanthropic, non-profit organization founded in 1960, the long-standing need for a new building was finally met when a new \$6 million Museum building was completed on a 400-acre site at historic Wright Field. Formal dedication ceremonies were held with President Richard M. Nixon in September 1971. The 800 x 240-foot building was paid for entirely by public contributions. It was designed specially for display of aircraft and provided indoor protection for nearly 100 aircraft. A \$1 million visitor reception center was added in 1976, again through contributions made by the public to the Museum Foundation.

A major Museum expansion, the Modern Flight Hangar, opened in April 1988 and houses over 50 aircraft including an F-117 "Stealth" fighter and the SR-71 "Blackbird." It is parallel to and similar in appearance to the 1971 Museum building. The new \$10.8 million building was funded jointly by the federal government and the Air Force Museum Foundation. Whereas the 1971 building retains the chronological layout, the Modern Flight Hangar exhibits are grouped by subject.

A twin hangar storage facility, housing about 30 aircraft, was opened in 1977 on the old Wright Field flight line, about one mile from the main Museum complex. Here visitors may view the Museum's presidential aircraft collection and research and development flight test aircraft.

The main Museum complex and the two hangars on the old Wright Field flight line provide over 10 acres or 448,000 square feet of indoor exhibition space--a far cry from the 8,100 square feet of the 1927-35 era. Further, the collection has grown from over 3,000 items to more than 50,000 items with only a portion on exhibit at any one time.

The Museum also has expanded to provide support to some 400 military and civilian museums around the world. This assistance involves the loan of more than 20,000 items, including over 1,600 aircraft.

During the 1980s, the Museum supervised the development of a Memorial Park on a portion of its 400-acre site. Over 400 memorials have been dedicated to commemorate the military service of individuals and organizations. Each memorial, whether a tree with a simple

plaque or an elaborate granite monument, was financed by interested citizens.

In October 1989, a contract was awarded to the B.G. Danis Company/Building Division of Dayton by the Air Force Museum Foundation for the construction of an IMAX Theatre. The 500-seat IMAX Theatre, constructed in front of and connected to the existing Museum buildings, opened in May 1991. An 80-foot-high glass atrium over the expanded lobby serves as the architectural focal point for the entire \$7.3 million complex.

Although the Museum is operated by the United States Air Force, its IMAX Theatre, Morphis MovieRide Theatre, souvenir shops and cafeteria are run by the Air Force Museum Foundation. Proceeds are used to support Museum activities and to remodel or expand Museum facilities. "Friends of the Air Force Museum," created by the Foundation in 1978, is an organization of aviation enthusiasts who support the Museum. For an annual fee, members receive a quarterly "Friends" Journal, discounts in the Museum shops, and other benefits.

The Air Force Museum Foundation is currently assisting with the Museum's newest proposed expansion project, the construction of a third hangar. Scheduled to open in 2003, the new building will allow the Museum to expand its exhibit space and reconstitute the flow of its galleries into a more chronological order. As a result of the additional space, the Museum will develop an area dedicated to telling the story of the U.S. Air Force in the Cold War and beyond. This area will illuminate the people, technology, missions and weapon platforms that helped democracy triumph over communism.